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## Holbein's "Dead Christ" in Basel and the Radical Reformation

My intention in this essay is to examine Hans Holbein's painting *Dead Christ* (1521–1522) from a new point of view. Earlier interpretations of the painting which approached it from various perspectives, ranging from late medieval piety and the Renaissance to the Reformation and early modern "modernism," have proven unsatisfying. I suggest, as an immediate context for the interpretation of the message of the painting, the so-called "Radical Reformation," the views of which were closely linked to the notions of Erasmus advocating the spiritual reformation of humankind. I argue that both Erasmus and his portrait painter Holbein belonged to the same intellectual group and the painter sought to emphasize the real death and true Resurrection of Christ as a human being. By doing so with great artistic force, he got close to the central message of the radical Reformation, namely the denial of the divinity of Christ and the recognition of his human nature. Consequently, *Dead Christ* also captures the central tenets of the spiritualism of the Radical Reformation.

keywords: Hans Holbein, iconography of Christ in the grave, Erasmus of Rotterdam, radical reformation, spiritualism

### *Radical Holbein?*

If one speaks about Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ*,<sup>1</sup> painted in 1521–22, the interpretation in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* inevitably bears mention:

I know that the earliest Christian faith taught that the Saviour suffered actually and not figuratively, and that nature was allowed her own way even while His body was on the cross. [...]. It is strange to look on this dreadful picture of the mangled corpse of the Saviour, and to put this question to oneself: Supposing that the disciples [...] saw this tortured body [...] how could they have gazed upon the dreadful sight and yet have believed that He would rise again?<sup>2</sup>

1 Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521. Oil on wood, 30,5 × 200 cm. Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

2 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Eva Martin (Boston: MobileReference, 2009), iii/6, accessed May 7, 2013, <http://www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/idiot/34/>.

In this essay, I seek to answer this question, also discussed by Julia Kristeva in her seminal essay on Holbein's *Dead Christ*, in which she interprets the painting as an emblematic demonstration of the "melancholic nature" of Holbein's art.<sup>3</sup> The starting point of Kristeva's essay is the disturbing effect of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, which finds expression in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*. She transformed the shock of the Russian writer into a cultural theory of pre-modern melancholy. As Sara Beardsworth writes in her probing study of the motives behind Kristeva's choice of subjects, "[i]n *Black Sun* Holbein's *Dead Christ* is the first exemplar of the artwork as indicator of and counterindication to nihilism, the one that stands at the threshold of the modern world and seems, on Kristeva's analysis, to exhibit the ethic that would support the separation of Church and State. The choice of Holbein as the starting-point for her minor history of works of mourning reveals that Kristeva is not writing a general history of art and melancholia but tackling the problem of modern nihilism."<sup>4</sup> Dostoyevsky scholars who contest Kristeva's interpretation suggest that perhaps the roots of Dostoyevsky's response to Holbein lie not in the existential fears of modern man, but rather in the fundamental difference between Eastern and Western visual culture. The Eastern concept of images was in essence transcendental,<sup>5</sup> and Dostoyevsky found this transcendence wanting in Holbein's painting.<sup>6</sup>

I am not interested here in *why* the Russian author was so irresistibly fascinated by this painting (he was nearly in a state of shock when standing in front of the Basel picture in 1867),<sup>7</sup> but seek rather to answer the question concerning *what* it was in the picture and in the message it conveyed that moved him with such force.

The story of the interpretation of the painting seems to justify the strange uneasiness it caused in Dostoyevsky.<sup>8</sup> Holbein's *Dead Christ* has been studied by many people from various perspectives, but there is still no accurate answer

3 Julia Kristeva, "Le Christ mort, de Holbein," in Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1987), 117–50.

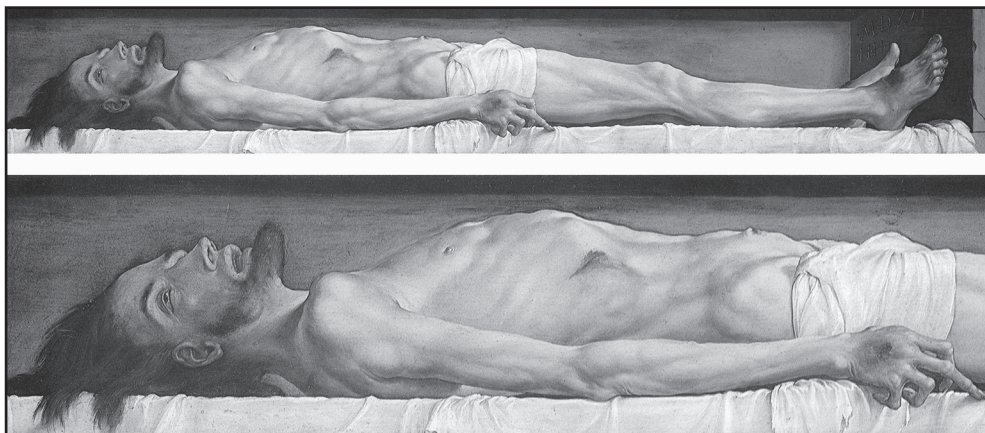
4 Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 152.

5 Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, intr. Donald Sheehan (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

6 Jeff Gatrall, "Between Iconoclasm and Silence: Representing the Divine in Holbein and Dostoevskii," *Comparative Literature* (Oregon) 53, no. 3. (2001): 214–32.

7 Anna Grigorevna Dostoevskaya, "Vospominaniya" [Reminiscences], ed. S. V. Belov and V. A. Tunimanov (Moscow: Hudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1971, iv/5). Accessed May 7, 2013, [http://az.lib.ru/editors/d/dostoevskij\\_f\\_m/text\\_0610.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/editors/d/dostoevskij_f_m/text_0610.shtml); Kristeva, "Le Christ mort, de Holbein," 119–20.

8 Gatrall, "Between Iconoclasm and Silence," 214–32.



Hans Holbein, Dead Christ

regarding the picture's genre, function, ideological background or precise meaning. The message of the painting has been interpreted within the framework of four different mentalities, but neither medieval piety, nor Renaissance thought, nor the Reformation, nor early modern "modernism" seem to have offered an adequate context for an understanding of the picture.<sup>9</sup> This feeling of dissatisfaction urges me to examine Holbein's painting from a point of view that until now has been neglected.

I call the point of view in question "Radical Reformation," although I am fully aware of the fact that the spiritual-religious movements to which this term refers were only in the making at the time the picture was painted.<sup>10</sup> They were not yet organized into churches, and if they existed at all, they functioned as loose intellectual circles. Their radicalism targeted not the revolutionary transformation of the world, but rather lay in their ideas concerning the need for an inner rebirth of man. Their spiritual horizons were closely linked to the ideas regarding spiritual Reformation of Erasmus, who can justly be called "radical" in this respect: "The freedom to choose, to approve or reject, was essential to him; no revelation could get in the way of that freedom. Also, he did indeed

9 Paul Ganz, *The Paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger*, Enlarged Edition (Oxford: Phaidon, 1956), no. 15; Kristeva, "Le Christ mort de Holbein," 117–50; Oskar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener, *Hans Holbein* (Cologne: DuMont, 2012), 88–90; Jeanne Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2011), 85–104.

10 André Séguenny, "Religions en contacts. Le problème du transfert des idées: Moyen âge, Renaissance et Réformes protestante et catholique," in *L'Étude de la Renaissance nunc et cras. Actes du colloque de la Fédération internationale des Sociétés et Instituts d'Étude de la Renaissance*, ed. Max Engrammare et al. (Geneva: Librairie DROZ, 2003), 257–73.

form a number of new concepts that were radical in the early modern period, and some that still are radical. What is more, he tended to defend, rather than abandon these radical concepts," writes Peter G. Bietenholz.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Holbein, Erasmus's friend and portrait painter and the illustrator of his books,<sup>12</sup> also belonged to this path-seeking humanist intellectual group. It seems therefore justified to suppose that his *Dead Christ*, in addition to its medieval, Renaissance and Protestant contents, also captures the most important traits of the spiritualism of radical Reformation rooted in Erasmus' ideas. I argue that it was most probably this radicalism that disturbed Dostoyevsky—and later Kristeva<sup>13</sup>—and they (mis)interpreted it as a challenge to the Christian faith, as a manifestation of enlightened atheism. The Russian author saw *Dead Christ* as a work of art that denies the Resurrection, and he claimed that "a man looking at that picture might even lose his faith."<sup>14</sup>

### *The Imitation of Christ*

Dostoyevsky's attention was caught by the unusual shape of the picture: "however, there was one of strange and rather striking shape; it was six or seven feet in length, and not more than a foot in height".<sup>15</sup> Those attempting to determine the original genre of the painting began with the same observation. For a long time, the view prevailed according to which Holbein's picture served as the *predella* of a winged altarpiece of the Passion that was never completely finished.<sup>16</sup> The obvious parallels between the painting in question and Matthias

11 Peter G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus. Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) 4–5; cf. Matthew Spinka, "Desiderius Erasmus, a Humanistic Reformer," in Spinka, *Advocates of Reform from Wyclif to Erasmus* (1953) (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, 2006), 281–379.

12 Rachel Giese, "Erasmus and the Fine Arts," *The Journal of Modern History* 7 (1935): 257–79; Erwin Panofsky, "Erasmus and the Visual Arts," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 219–20; Bächtzmann, *Hans Holbein*, 90–97, 114–19; Jeanne Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2011), 20.

13 "The Analysis first shows how this image of Christ's death brings out the full significance of a dead God at the threshold of atheism." Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 147.

14 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, ii/4.

15 The size of the corpse seen on the painting really corresponds to the average size of the human body. Ibid.

16 Ganz, *The Paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger*, no. 15; Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 150; Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 90; Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), 99–100.

Grünwald's Isenheim altarpiece reinforced this view. Many signs indicate that Holbein knew the famous Isenheim winged altarpiece, and one discerns Grünwald's influence in Holbein's depiction of the blue and green corpse of Christ in the grave.<sup>17</sup> Although the minute optical study of the perspective used by Holbein has by now completely invalidated the interpretation of the picture as a *predella*,<sup>18</sup> representations of the Lamentation on Medieval panel paintings could have been natural forerunners to *Dead Christ*, deeply rooted in late medieval piety.<sup>19</sup>

According to another ingenious idea, Holbein's picture could have been the cover of a Holy Grave installation used in the ceremonies of the Holy Week. New research has provided precise proof of the links with the iconographic traditions of the representations of "Christ in the grave" recently found in places of worship near Basel.<sup>20</sup> Holbein's picture, however—given its verism and naturalism (which far exceed Medieval traditions)—was probably inadequate for devotional public use, and there is no concrete proof of its origin as part of a Holy Grave installation.

What is true of all of these speculations is that the Basel painting is inseparable from the idea characteristic of late Medieval Passion mysticism of following Christ. In Holbein's era, the conviction that Christ put on a mortal body to save humanity with his death dated back a very long time. According to Medieval thought, man must take part in the Savior's sufferings in order to show gratefulness for God's goodness.<sup>21</sup> Passion altarpieces and Holy Grave installations were intended to give this notion visual expression. In the spiritual turbulence of the first decades of the sixteenth century, these old spiritual teachings were reinforced and given new meanings.<sup>22</sup> The words of *Theologia Germanica*, a fourteenth-century mystical booklet rediscovered in 1516 by Martin Luther, affected people with unusual strength: "Behold! Where the old man dieth and the new man is born there is that second birth of which Christ saith, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot enter

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17 Bächtshmann and Griener, *Hans Holbein*, 89; Kristeva, "Le Christ mort, de Holbein," 127–28; Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 150.

18 Christian Müller et al., *Hans Holbein the Younger: The Basel Years, 1515–1532* (Munich: Prestel, 2006), 257.

19 Jochen Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmahler in Basel 1515–1532* (München: Hirmer Verlag, 2005), 140.

20 Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmahler*, 137; Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 9–91.

21 Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," in Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 143–248.

22 Steven E. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 20.

into the kingdom of God' [...] now, if all mankind abode in true obedience, there would be no grief, nor sorrow [...] In this obedience a man were one with God and God himself were the man".<sup>23</sup> This booklet spoke of the possibility of the complete integration of divine and human nature (*Vergottung*), of *real* death<sup>24</sup> and *real* rebirth, and—together with *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis<sup>25</sup>—is well-known for becoming one of the basic books of radical Reformation.<sup>26</sup> (In the early stage of the Reformation both magisterial Protestant Churches and spiritual movements rejected the idea of Purgatory and Hell and interpreted Christ's descent to the dead as a "real death.") "Man could only be 'deified' if he renounced his own will and imitated the life and sufferings of Christ," writes Alastair Hamilton.<sup>27</sup> When Holbein painted Christ's greenish, decomposing corpse, he conveyed the same radical message of death and Resurrection in visual language. The depiction might easily fool someone who does not understand the main point of this message.

### *Erasmian Piety*

In his classical lecture, *Holbein and the Reformation*, Fritz Saxl presented Holbein as an Erasmian who—with serious reservations—gradually accepted the teachings of the Lutheran Reformation and at the same time could never identify with Luther's opposition to culture and always remained faithful to Erasmus's

23 Susanna Winkworth, trans. *Theologia Germanica*, intr. Martin Luther (1893) (New York: Cosimo, 2007), xvi.

24 Daniel Pickering Walker, *The Decline of Hell. Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Warburg Institute, 1964), 59–67; Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 237–87; Pál Ács, "The Theory of Soul-sleeping at the Beginning of the Hungarian Reformation Movement," in *Centers and Peripheries in European Renaissance Culture. Essays by East-Central European Mellon Fellows*, ed. Endre György Szőnyi and Csaba Maczelka (Szeged: JATEPress, 2012), 95–103.

25 Maximilian von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425–1650: From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller*, St Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

26 Both books enjoyed wide popularity also in the late decades of the sixteenth century within "liberal" Erasmian circles of the Reformation in Basel. The book on *Following Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, published by Sebastian Castellio, a free thinker living in Basel (Basel, 1563) was reprinted many times. Castellio also contributed to the translation of *Theologia Deutsch* into Latin and French. Hans Rudolf Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, 1515–1563. Humanist and Defender of Religious Toleration in a Confessional Age*, trans. Bruce Gordon, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 239.

27 Alastair Hamilton, *The Family of Love* (Cambridge: Clarke, 1981), 9.



spiritual Humanism.<sup>28</sup> In a penetrating study of the relationship of people who commissioned Holbein's paintings to the ideas of the Reformation, in her monograph on Holbein Jeanne Nuechterlein arrives at a similar conclusion: "The humanist scholars, however, had very mixed reactions to the Reformation: some of them sympathized with it and even became its intellectual leaders, but others were ambivalent or opposed it. Holbein's direct commissions from scholars, as far as we can tell, were mostly portraits and came from individuals who were ambivalent about reform".<sup>29</sup> We know that when Holbein depicted Luther in ancient costumes as "Hercules Germanicus" he was accused of being "too Erasmian".<sup>30</sup> This ambivalence between Erasmus' Humanism and Luther's Reformation can be discerned in *Dead Christ* as well, although it was painted eight years before the painter officially joined the Reformation.

According to Dostoyevsky, "there was nothing artistic about it".<sup>31</sup> This remark regarding Holbein's *Dead Christ* probably alludes to the undoubted lack of decorative elements—in Kristeva's words, "Holbein's minimalism"<sup>32</sup>—and the striking simplicity of the painting. Research on Holbein also raised the possibility that the painter consciously avoided gilding and overly strong colors,<sup>33</sup> in line with the hostility towards pictures (which by that time was growing in strength in Basel as well) of the Reformation.<sup>34</sup> Apart from the date and signature in Roman capitals,<sup>35</sup> there are no independent *all'antica* elements of style. On the other hand, this is obviously a refined Renaissance work of art that uses naturalistic allusions, making good use of the symbolic perspective. This is one of the reasons why it is one of the most brilliant pieces of "Northern Renaissance" art.

In studies of the perspectivist illusion-making and inner lighting of the picture, the idea has been raised that Holbein may have done the painting on private commission as part of an epitaph. As the work was preserved in the collection of the Basel family of Amerbach, it is possible that Holbein painted *Dead Christ* for the family tomb planned by the famous Humanist lawyer Bonifacius Amerbach, which was supposed to be placed in the small cloister

28 Fritz Saxl, "Holbein and the Reformation," in Saxl, *Lectures*, vol. 1 (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1957), 277–85.

29 Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 22–23.

30 Ibid., 100.

31 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, iii/6.

32 Kristeva, "Le Christ mort, de Holbein," 132–35.

33 Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 99.

34 Kaspar von Greyerz, "Basel in Holbein's Day," in Müller et al., *Hans Holbein the Younger*, 72–78.

35 Charles D. Cuttler, "Holbein's Inscriptions," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24 (1993): 372.

of Basel Charterhouse,<sup>36</sup> but together with many other Holbein paintings it was taken to a safe place in order to protect it from the particularly destructive burst of Protestant iconoclasm in Basel in 1529, thus becoming part of the so-called Amerbach-Kabinett, a collection of art founded by Bonifacius Amerbach's son, Basilius.<sup>37</sup>

Whether this is true or not,<sup>38</sup> we do know that the commissioner and first owner of the painting was Bonifacius Amerbach (CE I, 42–46), one of the most faithful disciples of Erasmus in Basel. It is a telling fact that Erasmus trusted him with the handling of his bequest, and he became the first curator of Legatum Erasmianum, a Humanitarian foundation supporting widows, orphans and poor students, founded by the Rotterdam master.<sup>39</sup> He was a moderate Protestant, and his active tolerance played a very important role in the fact that for a long time, Basel served as a refuge for the representatives of different spiritual and religious trends who suffered persecution elsewhere.

This tendency to openness also meant that even in the decades following 1529, the strict Reformation Mandate was never implemented to the letter. This in turn gave rise to a climate that enabled late humanism to thrive better than it could elsewhere. Among the many representatives of Basel's flourishing intellectual life during this period were the staunch defender of religious tolerance, Sebastian Castellio, and the physician and instigator of the Paracelsian renaissance, Theodor Zwinger—to name but two.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the commissioner and the painter of *Dead Christ* both belonged to Erasmus's innermost circle, so it is a good idea to approach the message of the picture through Erasmus's teachings. "Holbein understood, like none other, the 'wiry concord' of Erasmus's personality: the fragile delicacy of his body and the strength of his mind; his need for solitude and his craving for friendship; his

36 Müller et al., *Hans Holbein the Younger*, 257.

37 Christian Müller, ed., *Bonifacius Amerbach 1495–1562: Zum 500. Geburtstag des Basler Juristen und Erben des Erasmus von Rotterdam: Ausstellung* (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 1995).

38 In John Rowland's opinion "it was painted to be displayed in isolation" John Rowlands, *Holbein: The Paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger* (Complete Edition, Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 53; Jochen Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmaler in Basel 1515–1532* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2005), 136–37; Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 92.

39 P. P. J. L. van Peteghem, "Erasmus' Last Will, the Holy Roman Empire and the Low Countries," in *Erasmus of Rotterdam: The Man and the Scholar. Proceedings of the Symposium Held at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 9–11 November 1986*, ed. Jan Sperna Weiland and Willem Th. M. Frijhoff (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 88–97; Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio*, 47.

40 Greyerz, "Basel in Holbein's Day," 75.



humor and his seriousness; his love of tranquility and his thirst for action; his urbanity and his sarcastic conceit.”<sup>41</sup>

Of course, one cannot avoid the question: *which* Erasmus did Amerbach and Holbein follow? The “Protestant” Erasmus who rejected mechanical ceremonies and meaningless piety, or the “Catholic” one, who objected to the rude destruction of ecclesiastical traditions? Or perhaps the one who felt sympathy for the persecuted Anabaptists?<sup>42</sup> The one who considered the cult of saints and pictures a “folly,” or the one who broke out in tears because of Christ’s sufferings and so realistically described Jesus’s bitter tears and the blood streaming from the thousands of wounds of his tortured body?<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to arrive at a definite answer to a question to which Erasmus himself probably could not have given a single reply. It is, however, sure that his life, work and entire spiritual existence centered around the “true philosophy of Christ”: since Christ is the source of life, there is no life outside Christ—he said.<sup>44</sup> In a letter dating from 1521, the year of the painting of Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, Erasmus movingly recalled a Good Friday sermon of his English friend, the interpreter of Saint Paul John Colet; this sermon described Christ’s victory over death with brilliant erudition and also talked about the difficulty of living and dying as a Christian (To Justus Jonas, 13 June 1521, CWE 8: 242). Nevertheless, this was the *sine qua non* of salvation for them. Erasmus was charmed by Colet’s naively radical interpretation of the Bible. These two scholars and the Christian Humanists who followed them—among them, Holbein—read the Gospels with a new understanding: He died and was resurrected, and if you believe in him and follow him, you will live even if you die (“I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” John 11:25). Erasmus’s friends tried to take this *literally*. They simply wanted people to read the Bible as if it were true.

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41 Panofsky, “Erasmus and the Visual Arts,” 219.

42 Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*, trans. F. Hopman (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 178.

43 Johannes Trapman, “Erasmus’s Precationes,” in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Torontonensis. Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies*, ed. Alexander Dalzell et al., Medieval And Renaissance Texts And Studies 86 (New York: Binghamton University, 1991), 771–72.

44 Spinka, *Desiderius Erasmus, a Humanistic Reformer*, 281–379; James D. Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 104–15.

*"The Eyes"*

Dostoyevsky writes the following of the painting: "It represented Christ just taken down from the cross. It seems to me that painters as a rule represent the Savior, both on the cross and taken down from it, with great beauty still upon His face. [...] But there was no such beauty in Rogojin's picture. [...] This face in the picture was beaten all over, there were swollen, awful bloody and blue traces on it, the eyes were open, the pupils distorted, the white of the eyes shining with a kind of deadly, glassy light".<sup>45</sup>

Jeanne Nuechterlin offers a similar description: "The Dead Christ, however, offers no sign at all that this body can or will return to life, or even the usual emotional hints at Christ as a full person. The crabbed hand, stiff limbs, and most of all, the blank-eyed and open-mouthed stare announce that there is no spirit to reverence here".<sup>46</sup>

They are right: there is nothing in the painting to mitigate the terrors of death. Christ's body lies in the grave in complete abandonment, and nothing alludes to his future fate. However, since the picture inarguably represents Jesus with wounded hands, feet and sides (this is evident even if we forget about the inscription<sup>47</sup> on the late sixteenth century or more belated frame), an artistic intention emphasizing the *impossibility* of Christ's resurrection is out of the question in Holbein's world.

It has been shown that the dreadful calmness of the painting is broken by stirring elements of scenery, such as the folds of the blanket covering the rocks, which allude to the moment at which Christ was put in the grave. A similarly intensive element is Holbein's strangely distorted perspective, which shows the legs "from above," while the shoulders, the neck and the face are shown "from below". The right hand is placed in the symmetrical center of the picture, "closest" to the viewer; the hand almost reaches out from the tomb, its dark silhouette emphasized by the white shroud into which the improbably long middle finger is digging.<sup>48</sup> The hand is flabby but the gesture of the fingers is evidently symbolic, as in the case of all Renaissance pictures: the dead Jesus is

45 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, iii/6.

46 Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 110.

47 IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDAEORVM cf. Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmabler*, 138; Müller et al., *Hans Holbein the Younger*, 257.

48 Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmabler*, 132; Müller et al., *Hans Holbein the Younger*, 257–59.

showing the ancient sign of the cross, symbolizing resurrection, with the two middle fingers straight, the other three bent.

We see the inner space of the tomb from the left: we see the narrow wall of the tomb by the legs, with the date and the signature: M.DXXI. HH. However, the wall next to the head is invisible. Light enters the space from the opposite direction, from the right, and touches the corpse from bottom to top: it casts a sharp light on the feet, the upper part of the leg, the ribs and the shoulder, but the neck and the face are left in shadows, so that the half-open, distorted eye gives a mystic flash. Light interprets the scene, and this makes the space symbolic. It leads the eyes of the viewer from the leg to the hand, then to the head, settling on the eye, from which the viewer cannot remove his gaze. Dostoyevsky perceives the strange light flashing in the eye. But he may be wrong in saying that this is the empty stare of someone “just taken down from the cross.” The picture shows a corpse that has been dead for several days, and this is emphasized by the well-known but evidently false legend that the artist used a corpse fished from the Rhine as his “model”.<sup>49</sup> Jesus’s half-open eyes show not the emptiness of death, but life returning. Those who feel that Holbein depicted Jesus at the moment of the miracle of Resurrection are probably right. The symbolism of gestures and space seems to justify this view.

### *Conclusions*

When the depiction was painted, the Reformation was unquestionably only in its initial stages. Nonetheless, the essential questions of the new teachings clearly interested the painter and his patrons. As I have noted, the painting’s lack of ornamentation almost certainly reflects an affinity with the ideas of Erasmus’ Humanism and the Reformation’s critique of images, which was increasingly adopted by members of the intellectual community in Basel at the time, presumably Holbein among them. According to Nuechterlein, the objectivity of the painting, which resists any abstraction, is also a reflection on the theological debates brought to the surface by the Reformation:

Fundamentally, reformers questioned whether any material object, be it relic, image, or even the Eucharist, could serve as a direct conduit to God. By painting Christ’s body as so startlingly dead, using a descriptive mode as if he were visually re-creating a seen object, Holbein too appears troubled by the same question. Anyone approaching this image

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49 Nuechterlein, *Translating Nature into Art*, 85.

hoping to access Christ is confronted instead with a representation of dead matter—which is precisely how reformers perceived religious images and relics. [...] His viewers would have to draw their own conclusions.<sup>50</sup>

According to this view, Holbein's avoidance of any visual element that might be interpreted as a reference to the invisible essence of the Eucharist or the divine nature of Christ was based on considerations of principle. Precisely this "materialness" of the depiction allowed him to lead the viewer to something essentially imperceptible.

This interpretation seems both logical and historically credible, but one could approach the problem from a different perspective. If one attributes first and foremost not a theological, but rather a spiritual meaning to the painting (and this is justified by the subject, the genre, and the mentality of the circle of people who commissioned the painting, which was influenced by the ideas of Erasmus), then the striking objectivity of the depiction can be seen in a different context. From this perspective, the painting does not so much endeavor to guide the viewer's gaze from the visible world to the invisible, but rather consistently follows the path that Christ himself (and his followers) had to take. Hans Belting is astute in his observation that "the painter plays with fire" when "he inserts a breathtaking fermata between life and death into the spectacle of the body still spared from decay".<sup>51</sup>

The radical message of the painting regarding death and resurrection is found in this enigmatic "fermata." We have no reason to suppose that Holbein's painting contributed in any way to the dogmatic, Christological debate of the time. Nonetheless, the disturbing objectivity of the painting is perhaps related to Erasmus' version of medieval piety, in which the radical implications of this spiritualism can be discerned. But by emphasizing the real death and true Resurrection of Christ known as a human being with such enormous artistic force, Holbein got close to the most important message of the radical Reformation's rejection of the dogma of the Holy Trinity: namely the denial of Christ's divinity and the recognition of his human nature. It is a well-known fact that Erasmus's new translation of the Bible, based on the original Greek sources, served as a philological basis for antitrinitarian radicalism, since it demonstrated that the verses of the New Testament on the Holy Trinity are fake.<sup>52</sup>

50 Ibid., 88.

51 Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe*, 100.

52 Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus*, 33–68.

This conclusion is not entirely free of problems in its chronology, but it is perhaps also not entirely anachronistic if we consider that various radical trends in religious reform emerged and made their influence felt at the same time as the magisterial tendencies of Protestantism. Most of the representatives of the dissident trends (Anabaptist, spiritualist, and others) to some extent drew on (if in varying ways) the teachings of Erasmus. As Johan Huizinga notes,

One of the best historians of the Reformation, Walter Köhler, calls Erasmus one of the spiritual fathers of Anabaptism. And certain it is that in its later, peaceful development it has important traits in common with Erasmus: a tendency to acknowledge free will, a certain rationalistic trend, a dislike of an exclusive conception of a Church. It seems possible to prove that the South German Anabaptist Hans Denk derived opinions directly from Erasmus.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the meanings suggested above, the painting might have had another, more current message that was self-evident to everyone in Holbein's time. According to Saint Paul, the Church is Christ's body: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor 12:27). When Holbein depicted Jesus's death with such shocking and convincing force, he formulated in pictorial language something that Erasmus, Luther and the radical Protestants all believed: the Church, the old Church—and the old man in it—is dead. He does not exist anymore. Not only symbolically dead, but in the most literal sense of the word. But he will be resurrected if he follows his master, Jesus.

The only question was: when? The answer given by the painting is now. This is probably why the inscription marking the date of the painting is given a particularly important position. The X-ray study of the painting demonstrated that Holbein corrected the date from 1521 to 1522,<sup>54</sup> then later returned to the original version for some mysterious reason.<sup>55</sup> What we know for sure is that he gave considerable thought to the placement of the inscription. Julia Kristeva explained Holbein's inscription in the spirit of Nietzsche's nihilism ("God is dead"): "The painter's name is not lower than Christ's body—they are both at the same level, jammed into the recess, united in man's death, in death as the

53 Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*, 178; cf. Marc Lienhard, "Die Radikalen des 16. Jahrhunderts und Erasmus," in *Erasmianism: Idea and Reality*, ed. M. E. H. N. Mout et al. (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1997), 93–94.

54 At the same time Holbein worked on the wall paintings of the Basel Town Hall. Christian Müller, "New Evidence for Hans Holbein the Younger's Wall Paintings in Basel Town Hall," *Burlington Magazine* 133 (1991): 21–26.

55 Sander, *Hans Holbein D. J. Tafelmahler*, 134.

essential sign of humanity, of which the only surviving evidence is the ephemeral creation of a picture drawn here and now in 1521 and 1522".<sup>56</sup>

The inner symbolism of the picture provides a different, in some respects opposite meaning. Light enters the symbolic space precisely at the place of the inscription, moves on from the date 1521 to enter the white flashing eye of the resurrected Christ. It is true that the eye does not show beauty in the classical sense. It burns, however, with the determination of the radical Reformation, which sought to create God's realm here and now. In this sense, Holbein was not simply a distinctive artist of the "Northern Renaissance," but also of the "Northern Reformation".

### *Abbreviations*

- CWE 8 (1988): Collected Works of Erasmus, vol. 8. The Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 1122 to 1251 (1520 to 1521), trans. R. A. B. Mynors, ed. Peter G. Bietenholz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- CE 1–3 (1985–1987): Contemporaries of Erasmus. A Bibliographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation, vols 3, ed. Pieter G. Bietenholz, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

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56 Kristeva, "Le Christ mort, de Holbein," 125–26; Beardsworth, *Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, 152.



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